**Chairman’s report on the season 2020-21**

The previous season had ended prematurely once the Coronavirus arrived in Spring 2020 with the last two lectures being cancelled. If we had hoped that things would be back to normal in the autumn of 2020, and we would be able to return to meetings at Ealing Green Church, we were sadly disappointed, and like organisations across the world, we had to be content with meetings held over the internet in Zoom. This brought a new set of challenges for the organisers and for our speakers, but I am pleased to say that despite a few technical glitches, and inevitably some connection issues, the season went well. So first of all I must thank Philip Woods, who added to his role as Publicity Officer the duties of Zoom host, and carried the burden of making it all work. This has included sending out the invitations to members, dealing with the registrations, ‘hosting’ the meetings, and arranging practice sessions with speakers and myself so that we could be confident that things like screen sharing of Powerpoint would work smoothly.

There was a strong programme of lectures for the year which took us from China in the early 20th century to the Dreyfus Affair via Neville Chamberlain, a female shipwright in 18th century London, the Battle of Gettysburg, and David Edgerton’s ‘Rise and fall of the British nation’. In addition we were able to fit in the two lectures cancelled in the spring, so we able to mark the anniversary of the Field of the Cloth of Gold (1520) in its anniversary year, and that of the South Sea Bubble (1720) a few months late! We particularly enjoyed a hybrid meeting with Professor Giry-Deloison, who gave our sixth form lecture from his home in France, speaking about the complex relationship between England and Europe in the 16th century. As well as an audience of branch members listening from home, Twyford students were able to meet in school with their teachers, listen to the talk and ask questions.

We started the year using Webinar software, but this is rather impersonal for audience members, so we reverted to Zoom meetings which gives a better sense of a physical audience. These online meetings have been well supported by our members, as well as attracting people who would not have been able to join us in person at Ealing Green Church. Many of you also renewed your subscriptions, and although our expenses have been lower during the year, we have been paying for our Zoom licences, and sending small gifts to our speakers who have been denied the opportunity of the hospitality we usually provide.

We held our AGM last year in Zoom on the 15th December. At that point Pierre Thomas stood down as secretary, and I should like to thank him for his service to the branch over the last few years. He remains actively involved as a member of the committee. Rodney Reid has taken over at a confusing time as we try and find our way back into our usual way of running things, whilst coping with some health issues of his own.

As I have said in previous years the process of arranging the programme is a group effort and so I would like to thank those members of the committee for putting together what was a varied and entertaining programme. Peter Crane has continued to manage our finances with his usual efficiency and Ann Scurfield our membership records.

During the course of the year I was appointed to be Chair of the Branches and Membership committee of the Association, which means that I am also a member of the Executive Committee, a member of Council and a Trustee. It has been instructive to observe how branches across the country have adapted to the difficult circumstances we have all experienced, and many have reported that they have attracted new audience members once their lectures went online. These leads us to consider whether even after we can safely go back to physical meetings whether an online component would help us to reach wider audiences. The Association’s centrally run Virtual Branch which has operated through the pandemic has achieved big audiences, and there was strong support for the online conference held in November 2020 and the second one in May 2021. The HA nationally is in good heart and membership numbers have risen sharply over the last couple of years to over 10,000.

This current year’s lectures may have to continue to be held in Zoom if infection rates remain high and there is an understandable reluctance by members to come to the church. If things improve we hope to be back at Ealing Green Church and we have booked our speakers on the assumption that they will deliver their talks in person.

Her Majesty the Queen is the patron of the Historical Association, and it is hoped that all HA branches will find a way of celebrating her Platinum Jubilee in the summer. The committee has not yet planned an event, but we hope to hold a social gathering, rather than a lecture, in June to mark the occasion and to give us all a chance to meet up again after a couple of disrupted years. We also hope to be able to start organising outings again during 2022.

The good audiences that our lecture evenings receive suggests that we are getting most things right, but the committee welcomes your feedback. We say it every year, but if you have a topic you would like to have a lecture on, or a particular historian you would like to hear speak, please let the committee know, and we can see whether we can make it happen. If you have other comments about the way we do things please get in touch with me.

Peter Hounsell

Branch Chairman